

English Translation of Chinese Medicine Dosage in the Video Game *Black Myth: Wukong*

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As the domestically produced AAA game—*Black Myth: Wukong* has sparked global discussion about Chinese mythology, the cultural influence of video games, a new form of entertainment, continues to spread world-widely. Therefore, accurately translating the Chinese elements within the game has become one of the keys to the international spreading of Chinese culture. This paper will focus on the English translation of four main types of Chinese medicine dosages in the game *Black Myth: Wukong*, analyzing the roles of phonetic transliteration and morphological transliteration in conveying Chinese medical culture which embodies the Chinese philosophy.

Keywords: Chinese medicine dosage, English translation of Chinese video games, phonetic transliteration, morphological transliteration, international dissemination of Chinese medical culture

Introduction

The role-playing video game *Black Myth: Wukong* is set against the backdrop of *Journey to the West*, one of China's Four Great Classical Novels written by Wu Cheng'en. The game borrows the novel's story as a prequel, narrating the tale of Sun Wukong approximately five hundred years after the pilgrimage, when he relinquishes his Buddhist status, triggering a renewed celestial campaign against him by the heavens. In the game, players assume the role of a "Chosen One", embarking on a perilous and wondrous journey to uncover the truths behind the ancient legends. This game, which blends Chinese mythology with modern animation design, not only offers players from around the world an opportunity to delve deeper into traditional Chinese culture, but also provides a new avenue for Chinese culture to reach a global audience. Since its release on August 22, 2024, *Black Myth: Wukong* has gained immense popularity worldwide. According to statistics from the market research firm VG Insights, as of October 7, 2024, the game has sold 21 million copies on the Steam platform, generating total revenue exceeding \$1 billion (approximately 7.08 billion RMB). As a product of the digital revolution, video games possess a powerful capacity for cross-cultural communication. Serving as a medium, they carry and disseminate vast amounts of information with far-reaching impact. Through multilingual support, immersive storytelling, and the incorporation of cross-cultural symbols, video games have transcended mere entertainment to become a significant vehicle for multicultural exchange. The game features numerous names of traditional Chinese medicinal potions, sparking interest among both domestic and international players, as well as translation enthusiasts.

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Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture, as an integral part of Chinese traditional culture, encompasses rich philosophical ideas, cultural connotations, and practical experience. Professor Li Zhaoguo, a leading figure in the field of TCM translation, proposes three principles for translating TCM into English in his book *Translation Techniques for Classical Chinese Medical Texts*: prioritize medical content over literary embellishment, and convey the essence while adapting to the context; compare with Western medicine, seeking common ground while preserving differences; respect national conditions and maintain distinctive features. Based on the characteristics of TCM texts, Professor Li also introduces five fundamental translation methods: deepening, simplifying, lightening, diluting, and equalizing. Essentially, these methods represent the application of literal and free translation techniques in the context of TCM texts. Among them, the first four methods fall under free translation, while the equalizing method aligns with literal translation.

Therefore, in the context of video games as an emerging medium, translating TCM content requires methods that not only convey Chinese culture, but also ensure a seamless player experience. This necessitates the application of appropriate translation strategies.

Existing research on game translation primarily focuses on the localization of foreign games. For instance, Chen Panpan (2023) studied the Chinese translation of dialogue in the popular game *League of Legends*, proposing the use of domestication and foreignization strategies to achieve cultural adaptation and optimize player experience. Similar studies on game localization, such as those on *World of Warcraft* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (e.g., Wang, 2018; Zhao, 2023), generally emphasize the creativity, cultural adaptability, and importance of player feedback in game translation.

However, most of these studies concentrate on the Chinese translation of foreign games, with limited attention given to the translation of domestically developed Chinese games. Despite the rapid growth of China's gaming industry and its increasing influence in the global market, research on the translation of Chinese games into foreign languages remains scarce. In contrast, studies on the international expansion of Chinese games are still in their infancy. For example, while the global success of games like *Genshin Impact* and *Honor of Kings* has garnered widespread attention, systematic research on their translation strategies and cultural dissemination effects is lacking.

In the field of TCM translation, existing research primarily focuses on academic and practical levels. For instance, studies on the translation of classical TCM texts (e.g., *Compendium of Materia Medica*) or TCM product instructions (Quan, 2021) emphasize the accuracy and professionalism of TCM terminology, as well as the cultural barriers in cross-cultural communication. Video games, as a form of mass cultural product, cater to a broad and diverse audience. Therefore, translating TCM terminology in games requires not only conveying its cultural and professional significance, but also ensuring player comprehension and engagement.

Black Myth: Wukong offers text settings in multiple languages, including Chinese, English, French, and Korean. This paper will analyze the cultural symbols and connotations embedded in the names of four TCM formulations featured in the game, along with their English translations. Based on this analysis, feasible suggestions for translating TCM formulation names from Chinese to English will be proposed, providing valuable insights for the international dissemination of TCM culture.

Comparative Analysis of TCM Formulation Names in the Chinese and English Versions of *Black Myth: Wukong*

By comparing the names of TCM formulations in the Chinese and English versions of *Black Myth: Wukong*,

it becomes evident that the translation strategies for these terms in the context of the game's narrative require careful consideration. The translations must preserve the essence of TCM culture while avoiding misunderstandings arising from cultural differences between Chinese and English. Below, we analyze the four TCM formulation types—"丹" (dān), "丸" (wán), "膏" (gāo), and "散" (sǎn)—and their corresponding English translations: "pill", "pellets", "decoction", and "powder". We examine their differences in form, function, and cultural significance.

“丹” vs. “Pill”: Divergent Forms and Meanings

In TCM, “丹” (dān) is typically spherical or oval in shape, similar in size to modern pills, with a smooth and solid surface. Some “丹” may be coated with beeswax or other protective substances, giving them a hard outer shell. In certain contexts, “丹” can also refer to powdered medicines, such as those meant to be dissolved in water for consumption. Despite these variations in form, they are still collectively referred to as “丹”. In the English version of the game, “丹” is translated as “pill”, a term that in modern pharmacology generally refers to round or oval solid dosage forms intended for oral use. However, “pill” is a generic term that does not strictly describe the specific form or cultural significance of “丹” and is often associated with the standardized production of modern industrial pharmaceuticals.

The morphological differences between the two can easily lead to misunderstandings among English-speaking players about TCM formulations. In TCM culture, “丹” is not merely a medicinal form, but is deeply intertwined with alchemy (“炼丹术”, “liàn dān shù”) and the pursuit of immortality (“长生不老”, “cháng shēng bù lǎo”). It transcends the realm of medicine, symbolizing the philosophical pursuit of the ultimate refinement of life. Set against the backdrop of Chinese mythology, the game's depiction of “丹” also carries connotations of spiritual cultivation and divine ascension. In contrast, the English medical term “pill” primarily refers to “conventional pills”, serving as a generic name for medication. It fails to convey the philosophical, cultural, and historical imagery associated with “丹”. Therefore, translating “丹” as “pill” simplifies its profound religious, philosophical, and mythological meanings, reducing it to a modern pharmaceutical concept and stripping away the symbolic significance of TCM culture. As a result, the unique charm of TCM culture is lost in translation.

“丸” vs. “Pellets”: Similar in Form, Distant in Meaning

In TCM, “丸” (wán) is typically a regular spherical or near-spherical form, with its size varying depending on the dosage. It is made by mixing medicinal powders with binders (such as honey, rice flour, or water) and hand-rolling them into spherical shapes. The surface of “丸” can be smooth or slightly rough, and its color varies depending on the herbs used, ranging from dark brown, black, to yellowish-brown. The diameter of “丸” is usually a few millimeters, making it easy to swallow, as seen in the well-known “六味地黄丸” (Liuwei Dihuang Wan), while larger “丸” may have a diameter of up to one centimeter.

In the English version of the game, “丸” is translated as “pellets”, which are typically small, regular granules that can be spherical, oval, or cylindrical in shape, with sizes generally ranging from 0.2 to two millimeters. “Pellets” are produced through tightly controlled manufacturing processes, resulting in highly uniform particle sizes and shapes, which facilitate packaging and portioning. Unlike the traditional hand-rolled “丸”, “pellets” are often made using modern industrial techniques, such as extrusion or spray drying, reflecting a high degree of industrialization. “Pellets” can be single-colored or multi-colored (e.g., to distinguish ingredients) and are usually

smooth but may have slight roughness or mechanical textures. The standardized and industrial characteristics of “pellets” make them a common granular form in modern scientific fields. Translating “丸” as “pellets” may lead English-speaking players to associate it with small, loose granules, causing misunderstandings about the form and nature of TCM “丸”.

In fact, within TCM and Taoist culture, “丸” is not merely a medicinal form but is closely tied to health preservation, longevity, and the regulation of internal and external well-being. For example, the Taoist-refined “九转金丹” (Jiuzhuan Jindan), often spherical in shape, symbolizes the harmonious unity of heaven and earth, yin and yang. “丸” also represents a traditional handcrafted pharmaceutical process and embodies the concept of slow-release regulation and long-lasting efficacy. In contrast, “pellets” is a term from modern pharmacology that simply denotes a granular form of medication, devoid of any cultural or philosophical connotations. It is widely used in English to describe modern granular forms, not limited to medicine but also including agricultural fertilizer pellets, industrial granules, and more. The term “pellets” is overly industrialized and generic, unable to convey the unique cultural and historical significance of “丸”.

“膏” vs. “Decoction”: Different Forms and Structures

In TCM, “膏” (gāo) typically has a thick, viscous texture, feeling oily or sticky, similar to a heavy paste. Its color may vary depending on the herbs used, commonly appearing as dark brown, black, or yellowish-brown. For example, “膏药” (gāo yào), such as anti-inflammatory and pain-relief ointments, usually have a thick consistency and strong adhesion, allowing them to be directly applied or adhered to the skin. They are characterized by slow-release medicinal effects. Internal-use “膏”, such as “阿胶膏” (ē jiāo gāo) or some nourishing pastes, are often soft and can be scooped with a spoon, consumed directly, or mixed with warm water for consumption. “膏” is typically made by boiling or simmering herbs or other medicinal materials for an extended period, concentrating the active ingredients to form a thick, paste-like substance.

In the English version of the game, “膏” is translated as “decoction”, which refers to “a liquid form of medicine”, usually a transparent or turbid soup-like liquid with high water content. The liquid may appear brown, yellow, or dark, depending on the herbs used. It is primarily used for internal consumption, either drunk directly or taken through other methods (e.g., dissolved in water). There is a significant difference in form between the two.

In TCM culture, “膏” often represents the concepts of regulation, nourishment, and health preservation, particularly for the management of chronic conditions and physical constitution. It reflects the TCM emphasis on “internal and external regulation”. “膏” is commonly used to help patients recuperate, restore energy, and boost immunity. In contrast, the cultural background of “decoction” lies in its role as a continuation of traditional treatment methods, focusing on the rapid extraction and release of active medicinal ingredients. It conveys the refinement of herbal essences through boiling, emphasizing the efficacy of the medicine rather than long-term physical nourishment. Clearly, the English term “decoction” fails to express the nourishing and regulatory cultural meanings associated with TCM “膏”.

“散” vs. “Powder”: Similar in Form, Different in Essence

In TCM, “散” (sǎn) primarily appears as a fine powder, created by grinding medicinal materials into extremely fine particles. These particles are tiny and powdery or loosely granular, making them easy to dissolve or disperse. “散” has a light texture, allowing it to scatter with the wind or distribute evenly, and it is convenient for internal use (e.g., dissolved in water) or external application (e.g., sprinkled on wounds). It is typically dry,

easy to store, resistant to clumping, and has a long shelf life. Due to its powdered form, the dosage of “散” can be flexibly adjusted, making it portable and easy to use.

In the English version of the game, “散” is translated as “powder”, which also appears as fine granular particles, usually formed through grinding or chemical processing. “Powder” has a uniform texture and flows easily. Compared to “散”, “powder” is typically non-sticky, dry, and loose, making it easy to disperse or dissolve. The uses of “powder” are extensive, not only in medicine (e.g., pain-relief powders and antibiotic powders), but also in cosmetics, food, and chemical industries.

In TCM, “散” is often customized based on the patient’s constitution and condition, closely related to dietary therapy and health preservation. It reflects the concept of personalized treatment and regulation, emphasizing the synergy of medicinal ingredients and the holistic idea of harmony between humans and nature. “散” focuses on rapid absorption and flexible application, suitable for both external and internal use, and is commonly used to treat external injuries, reduce swelling, relieve pain, and promote blood circulation.

In contrast, “powder” typically symbolizes the scientific and efficient nature of Western medicine. Its widespread use reflects the standardized treatment and quantitative analysis of Western medicine, as well as its pursuit of rapid effects. In some cases, “powder” also represents the industrialization and commercialization of modern medicine. Therefore, the cultural backgrounds, historical traditions, and applications represented by the TCM term “散” and the Western term “powder” differ significantly.

Choosing appropriate translation strategies and methods is essential to preserve the cultural connotations of TCM names while effectively disseminating the richness of TCM culture.

Theoretical Basis

This study is grounded in two major translation theories: Functional Equivalence Theory and Translation Manipulation Theory, which are used to explore the translation strategies of TCM names in video games and their cultural dissemination effects.

Functional Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1965)

This theory emphasizes that translation should not only achieve formal equivalence in language, but also functionally convey the meaning of the source text, especially its cultural significance. Nida argues that the goal of translation is to enable target-language readers to understand and experience the text in a way similar to how source-language readers do. In the context of video game translation, this means preserving the cultural connotations of TCM terms, so that target-language players can comprehend and accept these terms. For example, when translating the TCM term “气血 (qì xuè)”, it is necessary not only to convey its literal meaning, but also to communicate its unique cultural significance within TCM theory.

Translation Manipulation Theory (Lefevere, 1992)

This theory posits that translation is not merely a linguistic conversion, but also an adaptation process involving culture, ideology, and power dynamics. Translation is influenced by the norms, ideologies, and poetic standards of the target culture, and translators often adjust or even rewrite the source text to meet the needs of the target culture. This theory provides a new perspective for understanding the translation of TCM terms in video games. Translators may adapt or modify TCM terms based on the target culture’s receptiveness and the overall style of the game to achieve cultural adaptation and optimize player experience.

Transliteration of TCM Formulation Names

According to Functional Equivalence Theory, the cultural connotations of TCM terms should be preserved in the translation process of video games, while ensuring that English-speaking players can understand and accept these terms. Transliteration, by retaining the pronunciation of the original term, effectively protects its cultural characteristics and avoids excessive cultural domestication caused by over-translation. For example, the 2024 publication *Chinese-Arabic-English Glossary of Traditional Chinese Medicine Terms* transliterates “气 (qì)” as “qi” rather than simply translating it as “vital energy”. The term “qi” not only retains the unique essence of TCM culture, but also conveys deeper cultural meanings. Transliteration preserves the unique form and original semantics of the term, reflecting the “semantic extensibility” of TCM culture. For instance, the same glossary transliterates “焦 (jiāo)” as “jiao”, conveying the TCM philosophical concept of holistic regulation involving the upper, middle, and lower “jiao”. If translated as “upper”, “middle”, or “lower”, it would fail to reflect the unique theoretical framework and holistic thinking of TCM. By transliterating it as “jiao”, the systemic concept is preserved, embodying TCM’s dialectical treatment approach and the harmony between humans and nature.

In the game *Black Myth: Wukong*, TCM formulations, such as “丹 (dān)”, “丸 (wán)”, “膏 (gāo)”, and “散 (sǎn)” are not only categorized based on form, preparation methods, and usage, but also represent core elements of TCM culture. These names carry rich cultural connotations, and using transliteration in translation allows target-language readers to experience the unfamiliar yet fresh cultural atmosphere of TCM, while avoiding the limitations of common Western pharmaceutical terms like “pill” or “powder”. For example, transliterating “丹” as “Dan” not only allows the audience to perceive the phonetic characteristics of Chinese culture, but also preserves the alchemical, health-preserving, and philosophical connotations associated with “丹”. Alchemy emphasizes the holistic connection between matter and spirit, as well as between the human body and nature. Transliterating “Dan” transforms it into a symbol of philosophy, cultivation, and longevity, rather than merely a medicinal term. This approach avoids oversimplifying the concept, ensuring its cultural depth and philosophical value are conveyed within the game’s context.

Transliteration also promotes consistency in the stylistic presentation of terms within the game’s text. For example, other formulations like “汤 (tāng)” and “酒 (jiǔ)” can follow the same transliteration strategy, ensuring cultural consistency in TCM terminology while providing players with clear and memorable concepts of TCM formulations. Transliteration effectively preserves the original meaning and cultural connotations of TCM formulations while presenting a visually concise and unified style. Firstly, transliteration directly presents the Chinese pronunciation of TCM formulations, such as “丹”, “丸”, and “散”, retaining their unique concepts and avoiding confusion with terms from Western pharmaceutical systems that may not fully correspond. Secondly, transliteration maintains simplicity and clarity while reducing visual differences between formulations, making the game text more legible and aesthetically pleasing, which aids player recognition and memorization. Additionally, transliteration avoids confusion with homonymous concepts. For example, translating “酒” as “Jiu” clearly reflects its medicinal properties, distinguishing it from ordinary alcoholic beverages.

Transference of TCM Formulation Names

According to Translation Manipulation Theory, translators need to adapt or rewrite TCM terms based on the needs of the target culture and the overall style of the game to achieve cultural adaptation and effective dissemination. The TCM system is vast and complex, containing profound cultural connotations. Although different TCM formulations have unique effects, there is also some overlap in their functions. In the game’s text,

“丹 (dān)”-type medicines are often associated with increasing health points or providing permanent buffs. For example, “九转还魂丹 (Jiuzhuan Huanhun Dan)” and “太乙紫金丹 (Taiyi Zijing Dan)” both have significant buff effects, helping players enhance their character’s abilities or extend survival time. However, some formulations, such as “保命丹 (Baoming Dan)”, are primarily used for emergency health recovery, often appearing in scenarios where players face powerful enemies or bosses. The main purpose of such medicines is to help players quickly recover health during high-risk moments, avoiding defeat due to severe injuries. This cross-use of formulations reflects the multifunctionality of TCM in different contexts, allowing players to flexibly choose suitable medicines based on current combat needs, thereby enhancing the game’s strategic depth and playability. In this way, the game not only showcases the richness of TCM, but also provides players with a more immersive gaming experience.

To better translate TCM names in the game, the author categorizes the main characteristics of the four formulations: “丹 (dān)” is precious, “丸 (wán)” is slow-acting, “散 (sǎn)” is fast-acting, and “膏 (gāo)” is slow-releasing. Based on these characteristics, transference is necessary when translating key names to convey the actual effects of TCM. In the game, “保命丹 (Baoming Dan)” is translated as “life-saving pill”. According to the transliteration method, it should be translated as “life-saving Dan”. However, based on the formulation’s characteristics, classifying it as a “散 (sǎn)” formulation better highlights the features of “散”: Rapid absorption, often used for emergency treatment, detoxification, or wound healing. Therefore, it is recommended to translate it as “life-saving San”, which not only aligns more closely with the attributes of “散”, but also helps players more accurately understand the medicine’s function and usage scenarios.

Similarly, “丸 (wán)” formulations are known for their slow-release and sustained effects, making them suitable for chronic regulation or long-term enhancement. In the game, this characteristic is reflected in medicines that enhance player abilities. For example, “龙光倍力丸 (Longguang Beili Wan)” increases attack power, critical hit rate, and critical damage for an extended period after consumption. On the other hand, “登仙散 (Dengxian San)” is translated as “ascension powder”, but its effect of temporarily preventing stamina consumption aligns more closely with the characteristics of “丸”. Therefore, after transliteration and reclassification, this medicine should be retranslated as “ascension Wan”. Likewise, the medicine “避凶药 (Bixiong Yao)”, which reduces damage over time, should be changed from “evil repelling Medicament” to “evil repelling Wan” to emphasize the slow-release effect of “丸.”

By categorizing and adjusting translation strategies, TCM formulations in the English version of the game are expressed more systematically, enabling players to clearly understand the effects and usage scenarios of each medicine. At the same time, this approach enhances the global dissemination of TCM culture, ensuring that the uniqueness and diversity of TCM can be understood and accepted by a broader international audience.

Conclusion

With the successful release of *Black Myth: Wukong*, the transliteration of TCM formulations has proven effective in conveying the philosophical ideas and cultural connotations of TCM. Taking “丹 (dān)” as an example, its transliteration not only preserves the original cultural concept, but also sparks curiosity and interest among international audiences in traditional Chinese culture, thereby promoting the global dissemination of TCM. Just as terms like “Qi (气)” and “Dao (道)” have been widely accepted, the transliteration “Dan” also has the potential to become an important symbol of TCM culture, increasing its recognition and influence worldwide.

Chinese culture has gained further global attention and dissemination. Cultural symbols, such as TCM formulations, elixirs, and medicinal wines in the game not only provide players with a rich gaming experience, but also offer an opportunity to understand traditional Chinese culture. Through the analysis of translation strategies for these cultural elements, this paper emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural uniqueness in international communication. Foreignization strategies not only help maintain the distinctiveness of the source culture, but also enhance players' cultural immersion and curiosity. To further optimize translation effectiveness, we have proposed recommendations for aligning different TCM formulations with their functions, aiming to convey Chinese culture while improving the game's logic and appeal. It is hoped that these research findings can serve as a reference for future cultural dissemination practices, promoting broader global understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.

As an integral part of Chinese culture, TCM not only showcases cultural heritage, but also presents significant challenges for its international dissemination. According to the Skopos Theory, translation strategies and methods are determined by the intended purpose and function of the target text. Therefore, TCM translation cannot be approached uniformly; the choice of translation method depends on its purpose. The author believes that in the context of game texts, which are non-serious scenarios for TCM usage, adopting a "lightening" principle to appropriately categorize and simplify related content is an effective dissemination strategy. This approach preserves the cultural essence of TCM without diluting its depth, while lowering the barriers to cultural communication and facilitating its global reach. "Lightening" does not mean simplifying cultural connotations but rather presenting the culture in its original form while making it more accessible and understandable to global players, thereby contributing to the internationalization of TCM.

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